

Pilgrimage to Hemkunt



Text by Jaswant Singh Neki • Photographs by Sondeep Shankar

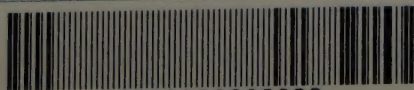
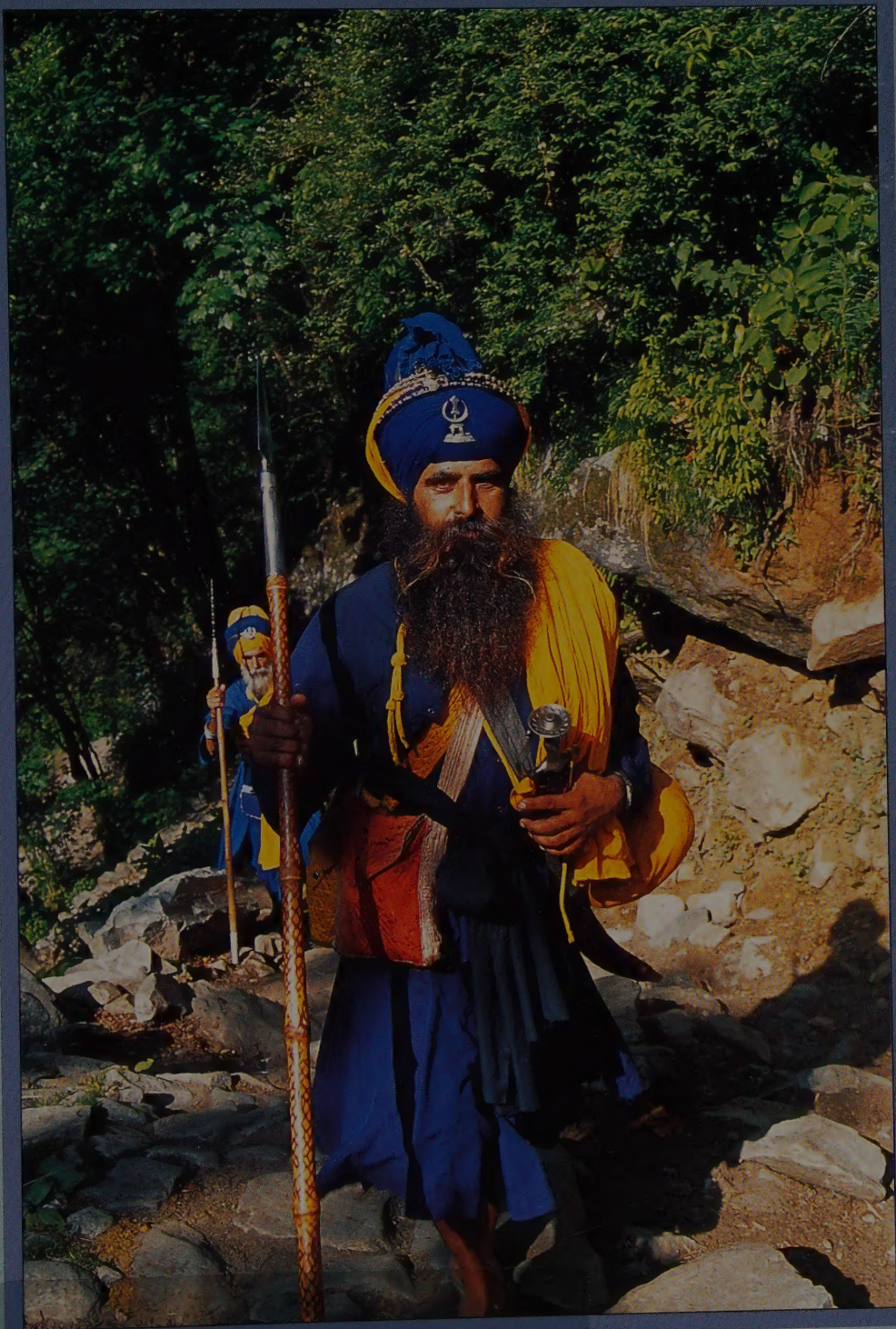
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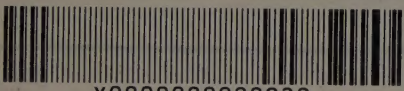


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Cover

A devotee offering prayer after a dip in the sarovar

Half title page

*A batch of Nihang Singhs on the march to
Sri Hemkunt Sahib*

Title spread

*The shrine and its panoramic surroundings
Photo © Gurmeet Thukral*

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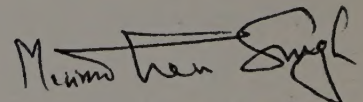
Foreword

The National Institute of Panjab Studies was established in 1990 to promote research on different aspects of Panjabi life and letters. It was subsequently recognised by the Panjab University, Chandigarh, as an advanced centre of learning. Apart from promoting research, the Institute has also been organising lectures, seminars and conferences. Some conferences were also organised in collaboration with other institutions such as the Department of Multicultural Education, University of London, Department of South Asian Studies, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor and the Centre for Global Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara. To mark fifty years of India's independence, the Institute organised an international seminar on 'Partition in Retrospect' in collaboration with the India International Centre, New Delhi.

In connection with the tercentenary of the Khalsa in 1999, the Institute took up a major research project of locating and cataloguing relics which are popularly associated with the Sikh gurus and other historical personalities. Our research team led by the Director of the Institute, visited various parts of India and Pakistan, and located and listed a number of valuable relics. During their field work our team located some very precious relics such as the *chola* of Guru Nanak, the *chola* of Guru Hargobind, *chola*, *dastar* and other relics of Guru Gobind Singh and Mata Sahib Kaur, sword-belt, *godri* and flag of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Our team was able to take pictures of these and other precious relics and record popular evidence connected with these objects. The team also discovered some rare *Guru Granth Birs*, *hukamnamas* and other historical documents and coins issued by Banda Singh Bahadur, Sikh chiefs, Maharaja Ranjit Singh and his generals.

With a view to sharing the results of our research with the larger audience and creating awareness for proper preservation of the endangered heritage of Panjab and conservation of the valuable relics, the Institute has decided to bring out a series of pictorial books under the 'Panjab Heritage Series'.

The Institute would like to record its gratitude to the Department of Culture, Government of India, for its initial grant for preparing a 'Catalogue of the Sikh Relics', to the Government of the National Capital of Delhi and the Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee for their financial support for publication of these books and to various institutions and individuals for allowing the Institute's team access to their rich collections. I would also like to thank my colleagues on the Governing Council and staff of the Institute without whose active cooperation it would not have been possible to bring out these volumes.


Manmohan Singh

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Facing page

Pilgrims braving snow on the way to Sri Hemkunt Sahib

Following double spread

The final ascent through snow-clad mountains

Double spread pages 10-11

Helping fellow pilgrims through the difficult ascent

Double spread pages 12-13

The holy shrine facing the frozen sarovar

Double spread pages 14-15

Brahm kamal looking upwards to the sky























Above: Sri Hemkunt Sahib

Left: Unfrozen faith in the frozen sarovar

In the lap of higher Himalayan ranges in Uttranchal is situated one of the highest located shrines of the world. It is situated at the summit of *devabhumi* (abode of gods) where ancient sages and seers are known to have meditated. This shrine is known as *Sri Hemkunt Sahib*. *Sri* and *Sahib* are reverential appellations indicative of the deference with which the Sikhs hold this holy place.

This shrine is thronged by multitudes of pilgrims every year. From a little over a hundred in nineteen-sixties, the number of pilgrims who visit this holy place every year has gone up to two lakh now. Devotees from far and wide are attracted to the shrine. They come by any available mode of transport – buses, trucks, cars, scooters and bicycles. Some even come walking from far off places. It seems to be assuming ever-increasing importance in the eyes of the devotees. Old men and women treading the arduous path, young men sporting colourful turbans, women with infants in their arms or astride their hips, young boys and girls bubbling with vigour and enthusiasm, all chanting the guru's word fervently, provide evidence of their faith and the devoted veneration they have in their hearts for this shrine.

The Sikhs and their Faith

The Sikhs, the world over, number around 22 million. They are spread over a hundred countries. As a consequence, everywhere they are in an infinitesimal minority except in Panjab where they have only a razor-thin majority. Yet, they are distinctly visible as a race apart because they carry their hair unshorn and sport colourful turbans around their heads.

They believe in one, non-sectarian, universal God who is not only transcendent, but also immanent in His Creation; who is not only 'impersonal' Absolute, but also has personal attributes and a personal relationship with His creatures. Him they worship by meditating on His Name (*Naam-japna*), i.e. acknowledging His presence. They are required to earn their living by honest labour (*kirt karni*), and share their earnings with fellow human beings (*vand chakna*). They reject discrimination between man and man on the basis of caste, creed and colour and 'reckon all mankind as one'. They are expected to uphold

social justice and seek welfare of all (*sarbat da bhalā*). For them voluntary social service (*seva*) is a compulsory prescription and an essential requirement for spiritual progress. *Seva* has two aspects: service of God, and service of mankind. In Brahmanical Hinduism, the Brahmins have reserved the service of gods for themselves, and service of man they relegated to shudras, the lowest caste. However, the Sikh gurus have propagated the dignity of labour and held that serving humans, as much as serving God, is the rightful duty of every Sikh. He must keep his spirits aloft (*charhdi kala*) under all circumstances and consider 'even adversity as the gift of God' [Jap (u): 25].

It was Guru Nanak (1469-1539) who founded the Sikh religion in AD 1507 after a profound mystic experience wherein God Almighty commissioned him to go forth as guru charged with the task of awakening people and making them realise His presence. He travelled far and wide for many years, discharging the task for which he had been commissioned. Shortly before his demise, he passed on the task to a successor. A lineage of nine successors followed him. The nine successors of Guru Nanak were Gurus Angad Dev (1504-1552), Amar Das (1479-1574), Ram Das (1534-1581), Arjan Dev (1563-1606), Hargobind (1595-1645), Har Rai (1631-1661), Har Krishan (1656-1664), Tegh Bahadur (1622-1675) and Gobind Singh (1666-1708). Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth guru, gave the Sikhs their holy book, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, also called *Sri Adi Granth* (the Primal Book). This holy book contains not only the compositions of the Sikh gurus but also of numerous Hindu saints and Muslim faqirs. It is, perhaps, the only pluralist scripture of mankind. He also gave them their spiritual capital, *Harimandir Sahib* popularly known as 'the Golden Temple', at Amritsar. A Muslim Sufi dervish, Mian Mir, was invited to lay the foundation stone of this prime shrine of the Sikhs. The tenth guru created the Order of the Khalsa by giving them 'baptism of the sword' (*khande ki pahul*). The term *Khalsa* denotes 'God's own knights-at-arms'. Members of this order observe a life of stern discipline and take a vow never to flinch from protecting the meek and fighting against oppression and injustice even at the risk of their lives. A sizable section of the Sikh community belongs to this order.



The Sikh Shrines

A Sikh place of worship is called a *gurdwara*, meaning guru's portal. Generally, it consists of a hall for the assembly of devotees who gather there to get in tune with the gurus' word or *shabad*, by singing and contemplating on it. Every gurdwara is accessible to one and all (even members of other faiths) without exception. A gurdwara can be recognised from a distance by the saffron coloured flag that flutters in its front compound or atop its building. The flag of a gurdwara is called *Nishan Sahib*. It has a triangular banner that bears the symbol  on one of its sides and  on its reverse. These symbols represent spiritual and temporal authority. The flag-post is covered by a saffron sleeve and bears a steel *khanda* (double-edged sword) atop.

Changing the saffron sleeve of the Nishan Sahib
at Gurdwara Rishikesh



Gurdwaras multiplied in numbers during the Sikh rule in Panjab (1799-1849). Some of these sprang up at spots which had been sanctified by the gurus' sojourn. They are known as the historic Sikh shrines. There were other non-historic gurdwaras set up by the congregations of devotees in their locales for the services of worship and fellowship.

During 1920-1925 the Gurdwara Reform Movement came into being to wrest the gurdwaras from the control of the *mahants* (priests) who had not only managed to get heritable ownership of the shrines, but also introduced non-Sikh practices in them. As a result of this movement, during which hundreds of Sikhs laid down their lives, the historic gurdwaras of Panjab came under the management of a committee established under the Sikh Gurdwaras and Shrines Act, AD 1925. This committee, called Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, is an elected body of the Sikh electorate. However, the historic gurdwaras outside Panjab and all non-historic gurdwaras (even those within Panjab) remained outside its control. The shrine at Sri Hemkunt Sahib, being outside Panjab, is beyond its purview.

Devotional faith alive all around



Hemkunt Sahib



Uniqueness of Sri Hemkunt Sahib

The shrine at Sri Hemkunt Sahib stands apart from all other Sikh shrines. It is neither a non-historic nor a historic shrine in the usual sense. It is related with Guru Gobind Singh, not with the incarnation during which he held his pontificate but with the one that preceded it. Whether it is appropriate to erect a shrine commemorating the previous birth of a guru did create a controversy among the Sikhs, but it does appear that the community, by and large, has come to accept this shrine enthusiastically. Regarding its relation with the guru's previous birth, the guru himself, in his autobiography provides an allusion:

Thus I narrate the tale of my own life.
How the Lord sent me forth to this world
While I was busy with austerities.
(There I was) by Hemkunt (the 'Receptacle of Ice'),
Amid the seven snow-clad mountain peaks —
Where even the Pandava king did his meditation.
There I remained steeped in austere contemplation
of *Mahakala-Kalika*.
Out of my contemplation, the Lord God,
summoned me to His Presence
And sent me hither to this world.
It wasn't my desire to come hither —
My mind was so fixed on the Lord.
He, however, persuaded me...,
And bade me hither, saying:
"I bless you as my son and commission you thus:
Go and propagate the (right) path.
Re-establish the practice of *dharmā*,
Deliver men who are noble,
And root out evil."

— *Bachitra Natak*: 103, 28-20.

As such, Sri Hemkunt Sahib is the only shrine that is connected with the previous birth of a guru.

This shrine is also unique in its locale. It stands over 15,210 feet above sea level. No other gurdwara is located at such a

Left: Route map of Sri Hemkunt Sahib

Below: A brahm kamal saluting the shrine





height; nor has any other gurdwara such an arduous and challenging track leading to it. It is quite possible that the arduousness of the track provides an attraction to adventure-loving Sikhs. The shrine is also unique in the vivacity and attraction of its surroundings. Snow-clad hills surround a crystal clear lake. Beautiful *brahm kamals* (divine lilies) erupting out of solid rocks surrounding the lake contribute greatly to the beauty of its setting. In the close vicinity of this holy place blossoms the 'Valley of Flowers' that lends this area an added attraction.

Another uniqueness of this area lies in the fact that at one time a large number of seers, sages and saints lived and meditated here. If this shrine has gained popularity with spirit-born people, it is quite understandable.

Left: The Khalsa marching over the harsh terrain

Below: A stretch of brahm kamal flowers

Following double spread: Grandeur of Nature
en route Sri Hemkunt Sahib

Double spread pages 28-29: A rare view of majestic
Neelkanth peak from Sri Hemkunt Sahib













Discovery of Sri Hemkunt Sahib

Long before the Sikhs started frequenting Sri Hemkunt Sahib, the local inhabitants of that area held the lake there with great awe and reverence and called the area around it *lokpāl*, i.e. sustainer of people.

In spite of the fact that Hemkunt was mentioned in the autobiography of Guru Gobind Singh, its site remained in oblivion for well over two centuries. This happened in spite of indication of its location having been provided in the guru's own account. It was the Sikh historian-poet Bhai Santokh Singh (1787-1843) who set his imagination to describe and elaborate the story of the *Dusht Daman*, the name he chose for the guru (literally 'vanquisher of the evil'). He also provided the description of his *tapasthan* or the place where he meditated. In the late nineteenth century, a Nirmala scholar, Pandit Tara Singh Narotam, prepared a compendium of the various Sikh pilgrim spots along with their description. That included Sri Hemkunt Sahib. On the basis of the indication provided in the *Mahabharata* (1:199) about the site where the Pandu king had meditated, Narotam trekked up to the spot and was able to verify the site of Sri Hemkunt Sahib.

Left: A devotee at the Lakshman Temple

Below: Reflection of the snow-clad peaks in the sarovar



More recently, the well-known poet-historian-theologian, Bhai Vir Singh (AD 1872-1957), carefully examined Narotam's evidence relating to the discovery of Sri Hemkunt Sahib and accepted it to be authentic. He provided an elaborated description of the spot in his biography of the tenth guru, *Kalghidhar Chamatkar*, employing more scientific information about the flora and fauna seen at such an altitude.

However, the first person to get attracted towards the task of discovering the actual location of the *tapasthan* was Sant Sohan Singh (of Tehri, Garhwal) a retired *granthi* from the army. He had been inspired by the description of the spot in the work of Bhai Vir Singh. He trekked up the holy spot a number of times. In 1934, he visited the spot in the company of Baba Kartar Singh Bedi, and came back determined to set up a gurdwara there. He met Bhai Vir Singh, who also sensed that the spot that the sant had visited was the right one. He provided the sant with the necessary material support and furnished him with the

*A newly wed lady emerging out of
Gurdwara Gobind Ghat after offering prayers*



wherewithal required for setting up a gurdwara. The sant, along with Havaladar Baba Modan Singh, engaged a contractor and had a ten-foot square room for the gurdwara constructed there. By installing the sacred volume of *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* in the room they had built, they established a gurdwara there. The Havaladar and one of his companions stayed on there to perform services at the gurdwara. In 1960, the Havaladar established a seven-member trust—Gurdwara Hemkunt Sahib Management Trust. The founder members of the trust were Havaladar Modan Singh, Colonel Joginder Singh Mann, S. Shamsheer Singh, S. Raghubir Singh Kabaria, Baba Gurmukh Singh, S. Gurbaksh Singh Bindra and Colonel Amar Singh. This Trust not only took over the management of Sri Hemkunt Sahib but also established gurdwaras all along the path to it—in Hardwar, Rishikesh, Srinagar, Joshi Math, Gobind Ghat and Gobind Dham. In all these places, the Trust steadily upgraded the facilities for the increasing number of pilgrims.

Pioneers at the site of Sri Hemkunt Sahib



Pilgrimage to Sri Hemkunt Sahib

Pilgrimage to this holy shrine is best undertaken during summer between July and September. The region remains under snow between October and June and so becomes inaccessible.

We propose to start our pilgrimage to Sri Hemkunt Sahib from Delhi, not only because it is the capital of India and connected with the entire country by road, rail and air, but more importantly because it is in itself a pilgrimage spot for the Sikhs. Here many important historic Sikh gurdwaras are located. These include Gurdwaras Sis Ganj, Rakab Ganj, Bangla Sahib, Bala Sahib, Moti Bagh, Majnu-da-Tilla, Nanak Piao and Mata Sundri. In fact, many *jathas* (group of devotees) for the pilgrimage to Sri Hemkunt Sahib start from Gurdwara Bangla Sahib.

A jatha setting out from Sri Bangla Sahib for Sri Hemkunt Sahib



From Delhi the *jathas* first proceed to Hardwar, an important pilgrimage spot. Here, the river Ganga alights from the Himalayas and enters the great North Indian plain. For the Hindu brethren, a dip in the Ganga at Hardwar is most auspicious. They even immerse the ashes and other remains of their deceased relations in the Ganga at Hardwar to ensure their salvation in the hereafter. This place is sacred also for the Sikhs because Guru Nanak Dev paid a visit here. Early during his first odyssey he arrived here at the spot called Har ki Pauri. He found a mass of Hindu pilgrims standing in the waters of the Ganga and offering *argha* (palmfuls) of water to the sun in order to quench the thirst of the souls of their ancestors who, they believed, inhabited the sun. The guru also got into the river and started throwing his palmfuls in the opposite direction. Astonished by his queer act, people asked him as to what he was doing. He, with a wry smile, asked them to first explain what they were doing. They told the guru that they were slaking the thirst of their ancestors now residing on the sun. The guru, at that, said, he was watering his fields in Kartarpur. The pilgrims laughed at him and said, "Ignorant fool! How can your water reach Kartarpur which is quite a few hundred miles from here?" The guru said, "If yours can reach the sun that is millions of miles away, why can't mine reach Kartarpur just a few hundred miles from here?" The lesson went home and people gathered around him for a sermon.



Right: Inside the gurdwara at Hardwar

Following double spread: Panoramic view of Har ki Pauri in Hardwar



महर्षि वाल्मीकि मन्दिर

प्राचीन माँ कालीदेवी मन्दिर

मन्दिर

HOTEL OSHO

धर्मराज श्री गणेश मण्डप
श्री पातालेश्वर मन्दिर
श्री नवरात्र मन्दिर

श्री गणेश मन्दिर
श्री लक्ष्मी मन्दिर
श्री विष्णु मन्दिर

श्री महाशिव मन्दिर

नानापाव

मात्र



Twenty-four kilometers from Hardwar is Rishikesh (abode of *rishis*) known to have been a halting spot of Guru Nanak Dev on his way to Mount Sumer. Sant Surat Singh is said to have spent much of his time to discover the guru's *tapshila* (meditation spot). In Rishikesh, an impressive two-storeyed gurdwara building in 5 hectare land has come up through the efforts of Sri Hemkunt Gurdwara Management Trust. The gurdwara complex provides accomodation for 4000 pilgrims. There is also a school where children are trained to become *granthis* and *ragis*.

Gurdwara of Hemkunt Management Trust
at Rishikesh

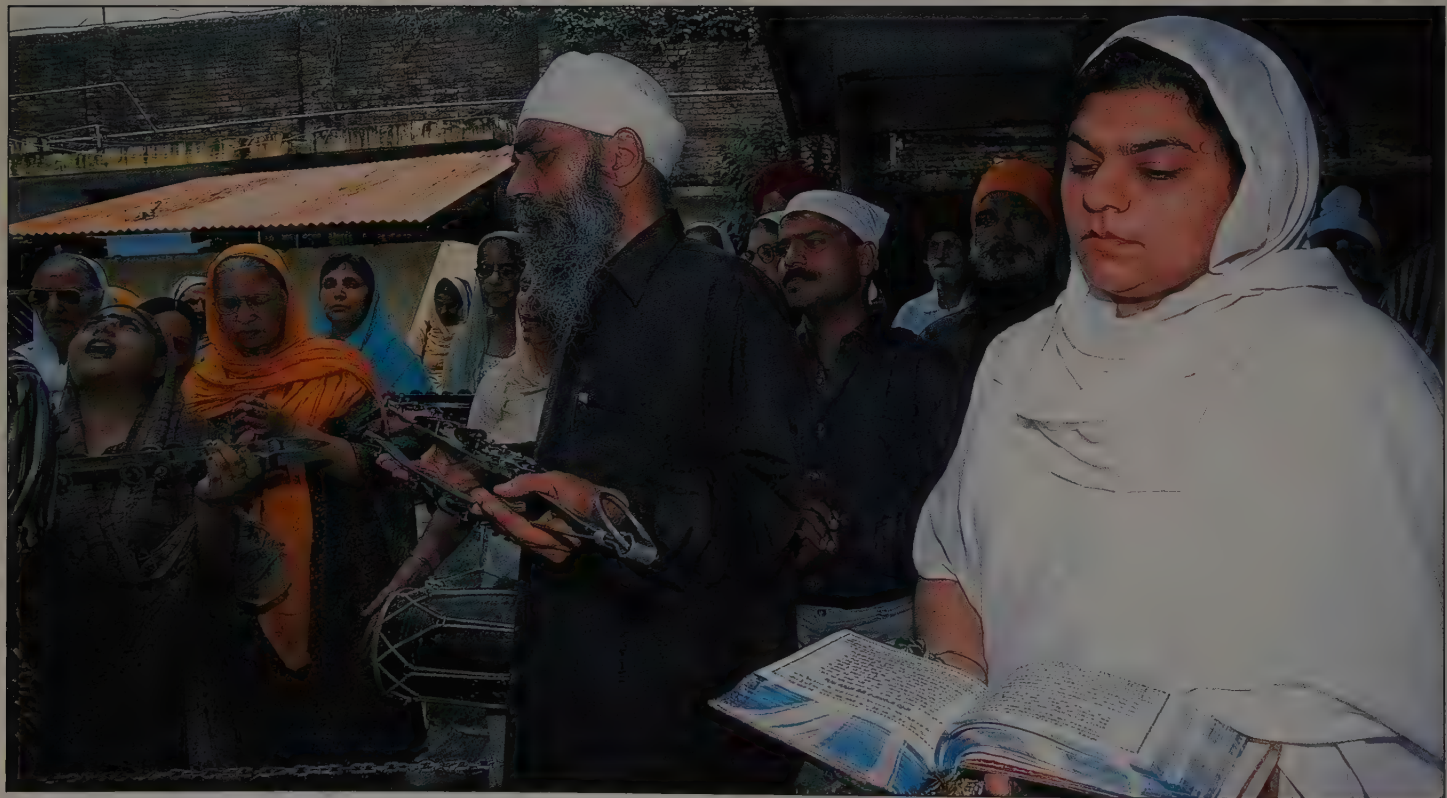


Rishikesh is the final station on that particular line of Northern Railway. From here begins the mountainous journey by road. Even from the gurdwara itself multiform mountains are visible rising up. Within easy reach from the gurdwara are Lakshman Jhoola and Swaraga Ashram.

Pilgrims generally stay for the night at the gurdwara in Rishikesh and utilise their time listening to *kirtan* and getting introduced to one another. They get inoculated against cholera, if they have not done so already. They also arrange to procure things that they might require during the journey ahead.

Kirtan being performed inside the gurdwara at Rishikesh





From Rishikesh the pilgrims proceed to Dev Prayag (altitude: 1,700 feet), where the rivers Alaknanda and Bhagirathi Ganga meet. It is here that the river Alaknanda assumes the name Ganga—a name that goes with it thereafter right up to the sea.



Left above: A jatha being given necessary instructions before starting off from Gurdwara Rishikesh

Left below: Men and women immersed in devotion

Right: A group of devotees on bicycles

Following double spread: The captivating panorama at Dev Prayag





With rising mountains on one side and the dancing waters of the stream on the other, many captivating scenes enliven the journey ahead. Such scenes provide befitting inspiration for the spiritual fervour of the pilgrims. When they sing the holy hymns, their fervent voices drown even the drone of the vehicles that transport them.

From Dev Prayag on, the road forks into two tracks. One goes alongside Bhagirathi Ganga to Gangotri—the source of Ganga. The other goes alongside Alaknanda to Sri Hemkunt Sahib and Badri Nath temple. Pilgrims to Sri Hemkunt Sahib take the latter for Srinagar (Garhwal). All along the lush green of the sub-tropical vegetation blending with the azure of the sky provides a soothing blend of natural hues. The touching tunes of singing birds, ballads of the bubbling brooks, sonorousness of the splashing waterfalls and rhapsody of the gushing streams together weave a superb symphony.

Below: A sunlit rock looking at a waterfall

Facing page: Devotees marching on foot

Following double spread: Exquisite view of river Alaknanda at Srinagar









Having covered a distance of 107 km from Rishikesh, one reaches Srinagar (Garhwal), a linear town at an altitude of 3400 feet, occupying a narrow strip along the river Alaknanda and surrounded by a spacious valley studded with picturesque spots.

On his way to Mount Sumer, Guru Nanak Dev is said to have made a stop here also. According to a local legend, a shrine known as Charan Padak came to be established where the guru had rested his feet. However, a strong flood that destroyed the whole town also washed away that shrine. The present town came up some 1.5 km away from the ancient site whose ruins are still visible. The site of Guru Nanak Dev's memorial was in the vicinity of the royal palace. However, its exact location has yet to be authentically identified.

The gurdwara at Srinagar



In this historic town, an important meeting took place between Guru Hargobind Sahib, the sixth Sikh guru, and Samarth Ramdas, the spiritual leader of the Marathas who also was a mentor of Shivaji. Samarth Ramdas asked the guru, "You are a successor of Guru Nanak. But he, I believe, was a recluse, while you carry arms like a prince". The guru replied, "Guru Nanak had renounced *maya* and not the world. My arms are for the defence of the poor and the oppressed. My appearance might be princely, my interior identifies with the meek and the poor". The guru's reply impressed Samarth Ramdas and he adopted the same mission himself (vide his book *Das Praboth*).

Srinagar is related not only to Guru Nanak Dev and Guru Hargobind but, in an indirect way, also with Guru Gobind Singh. Raja Fateh Shah of Garhwal, without any reason, attacked a batch of the guru's Sikhs. A confrontation ensued in Bhangani but Fateh Shah's forces were routed. After their victory in Bhangani, the guru's men requested him to let them go ahead and annex a few towns of Garhwal. The guru, however, discouraged them saying, "My mission in this world is to uphold the men of God, and to root out the evil, and the unjust. It is not at all to establish any kind of kingdom".

It is thus that Srinagar has come to have a three-fold importance for the Sikhs. Gurdwara Sri Hemkunt Sahib Management Trust has set up a beautiful gurdwara here. The site of the gurdwara, near the town post office, was at one time in the possession of an Udasi sadhu, Mahant Purshotam Das. He also possessed a handwritten copy each of the two scriptures—*Sri Guru Granth Sahib* and *Sri Dasam Granth Sahib*. The manuscript of *Sri Dasam Granth Sahib* was dated Phagun sudi 8, Samvat 1892 B. (i.e. AD 1855). The gurdwara complex here also, like the one in Rishikesh, includes residential quarters for the pilgrims.

From this historically important town of Srinagar, the pilgrims proceed to Joshi Math, about 146 km from Srinagar, and about 262 km from Rishikesh. On the way, one passes by three *prayags* (confluence of rivers). The first one is Rudra Prayag—the confluence of Alaknanda with Mandakini. The second one is Karan Prayag—the confluence of Alaknanda and Pindar Ganga. The third one is Nand Prayag—the confluence

of Alaknanda and Hem Ganga. These confluences, along with the tributary brooks and streams, present attractive waterscapes.

A little beyond these *prayags* is a small town called Pipal Koti (altitude 3,500 feet). This place is an important market of musk, *shilajeet* and honey. About 11 km from Pipal Koti is Patal Ganga. Here the slopes of the mountain present a breathtaking scene and one feels impelled to bow one's head to the Creator of these marvels.

At Joshi Math (altitude: 6,000 feet) is located one of the four *maths* established by Shankaracharya. The other three *maths* established by Shankaracharya are Shringeri Math in Mysore, Sharada Math in Gujarat and Govardhana Math in Orissa. A pathway from Joshi Math leads to Kailash Mandir. On the mountains beyond this place, the legendry *sanjeevani* shrub is believed to have grown.

In Joshi Math, Gurdwara Dusht Daman was established in 1961 in the main market of this town. From this gurdwara is visible the spectacle of a high mountain rising in front of it at some distance. It is shaped somewhat like an elephant. Hence it is called Hathi Parbat (Mount Elephant). In the gurdwara complex arrangements exist for board and lodging for the pilgrims. The *jathas* generally halt here for a night before proceeding further to Gobind Ghat.

As one proceeds further, one comes across the fifth *prayag* of the journey. This is Vishnu Prayag marking the confluence of Alaknanda and Vishan Ganga. Picturesque mountainscapes



The gurdwara at Joshi Math

studded with lush mountain slopes, beautiful tree lines, splashing waterfalls and sprightly springs decorate the whole expanse. Terraced fields sway in the mountain breeze. Quaint houses framed with bright flowers present an uncanny spectacle. Nature's artistry, time and again, fills one with aesthetic amazement and reverential awe.

About 17 km from Joshi Math, one arrives at Gobind Ghat (altitude 6000 feet) on the west bank of river Alaknanda close to Nand Prayag. Here the motorable road ends and the steep ascent further has to be covered on foot. Many devotees make the austere venture to go it barefoot. The walk ahead being arduous, pilgrims usually stop for the night here.

Gobind Ghat is a hamlet of inns and lodging houses. Here one can get a room to stay; there are restaurants, teastalls and shops where one can find items required for the journey ahead—such as walking sticks, raincoats, woollens and trekking shoes, as also souvenirs, religious books, audio cassettes of *kirtan* and posters of Sri Hemkunt Sahib.

Below: A view of the Badrinath Temple

Following double spread: Gurdwara Gobind Ghat in the lap of nature









A cobbled pathway meanders through the colourful marketplace, and leads one to the gurdwara complex. The gurdwara is all the time brimming with visitors and replete with religious festivity. Blissful sessions of heavenly *kirtan* enliven the spirits of the devout pilgrims. Opportunities for *seva* (serving others) in the *langar* (free kitchen) and other activities of the gurdwara are plentiful, and devotees consider themselves blessed to be able to take part in these. Here strangers become friends, and co-travellers become brethren-in-faith. No one remains alien here. Such indeed is the guru's house.

Apart from the pilgrims for Sri Hemkunt Sahib, even tourists heading to the 'Valley of Flowers' stop here, partake of the guru's *langar* and rest for the night in the lodging—house of the gurdwara complex. The tourists are impressed with the services available gratis at the guru's place. Everyone, without

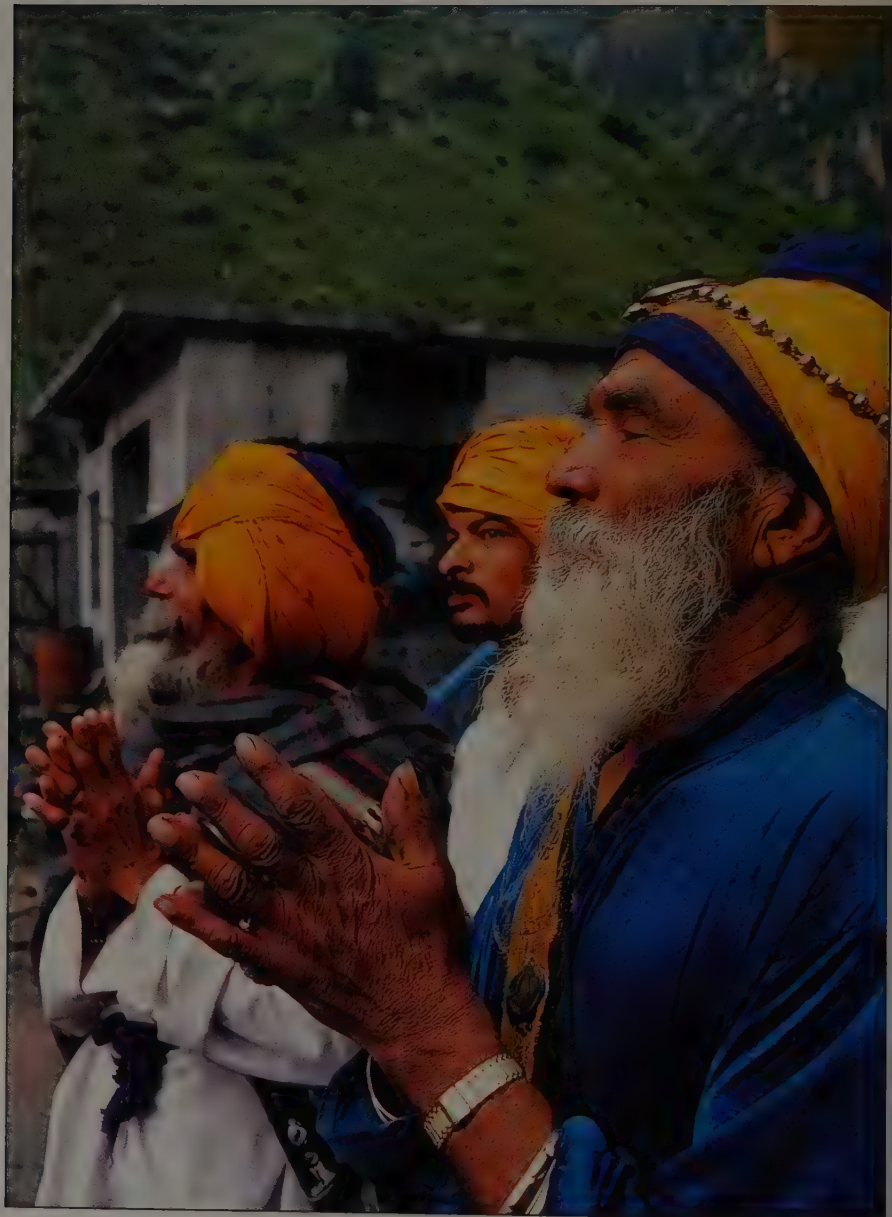
Left: Sevadars at the entrance of Gurdwara
Gobind Ghat

Below: Eating joints en route



prejudice of caste, creed or colour, is welcome. While on way to Badri Nath, the late President of India, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, stopped here for a while. He gave public expression to the comfort and peace that he enjoyed here.

Pilgrims leave here the luggage they do not require during the journey ahead, and set out for Gobind Dham after crossing the bridge over Alaknanda early in the morning. Before this bridge was made, it was very difficult to cross the forceful Alaknanda. Devotees used to tie ropes around their waist and hold together while crossing the river.



Right: Devotees offering ardas

*Facing page: Unaffected by the difficult terrain
a child enjoys her sleep.*



The 19 km distance ahead, marked by humps and troughs, proceeds along Hem Ganga. The ascent gets tougher as devotees move on. Time and again, they halt at some teastall or eating joint run by local villagers. Smoking is strictly prohibited all along. The spectacle now is replete with vegetation of the 'temperate zone'.

Although there are such rich scenes everywhere on the way, the attention of most of the pilgrims does not stay focused on them on account of the arduousness of the terrain. Yet, when they stop to renew their breath, Nature's beauties refresh their spirits. Another factor that prevents their spirits from flagging is the ready help and encouragement that comes from fellow pilgrims. That makes the hardships of the way look relatively mild and easier to brave.

Below: Bare feet undeterred by hard rocks

Facing page: An aged woman being carried in a kandi

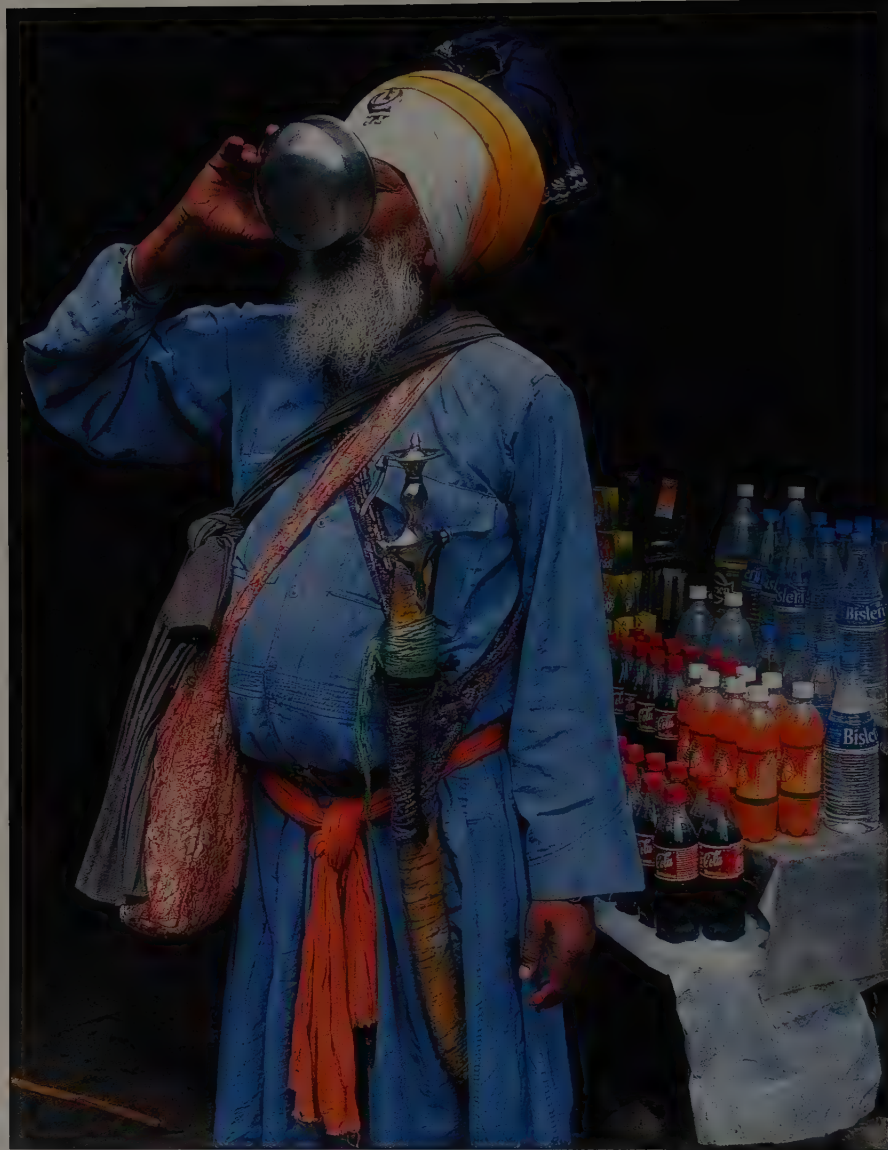
Following double spread: A sahajdhari jatha immersed in devotional hymns











Right top: Unaffected by modernisation, a Nihang Singh prefers to use his traditional bata to quench his thirst

Right below and facing page: Horses and palanquins are used by some of the devotees to complete their journey

Following double spread: Adventurous pilgrims braving the gushing river Hem Ganga

Double spread pages 66-67: Lush green fields around village Pulgaon

Double spread pages 68-69: Pilgrims ascending the path by the side of descending Hem Ganga

















Walking in a spirit of togetherness, singing the Lord's praises, and wading through the richness of Nature, the pilgrims reach Gobind Dham (altitude 10,500 feet). The native name of this hamlet is Ghagharia. Pilgrims to Sri Hemkunt Sahib take rest here for the night in order to stretch their weary limbs. The next morning they have to undertake the very steep ascent to their destination.



Right: Gurdwara Gobind Dham

Facing page: Pilgrims resting at Gurdwara Gobind Dham after a long trek



About three quarters of a kilometre up from Gobind Dham a route separates for the Valley of Flowers. However, most of the flowers found in the valley also deck the route to Gobind Dham. *Horsechestnut* trees are a common sight. Medium-sized trees of *albizia* with pink flowers make an indelible impact. Noticeable are tall-leafed plants of the lily family with large funnel-shaped flowers unfolding their pale yellow or cream coloured petals. Robust, handsome *asters* in lilac, purple, mauve or magenta, with yellow disc florets, are seen in stretches. As impressive as these are also the much branching arching shrubs of *hyperium*. Stiff-leafed century plants of *agave* family also hold out their heads here and there. One also comes by plants of *arum* family having male and female flowers on separate plants. The path and the river meander together through this picturesque mountainous landscape whose majesty overawes the soul. Immaculately clean natural surroundings and chanting of *gurbani* (holy hymns) by the pilgrims together seem to weave a celestial harmony.

Below: Floral beauty strewn around by Nature

Facing page: A view of snow-clad peaks from Gobind Dham.

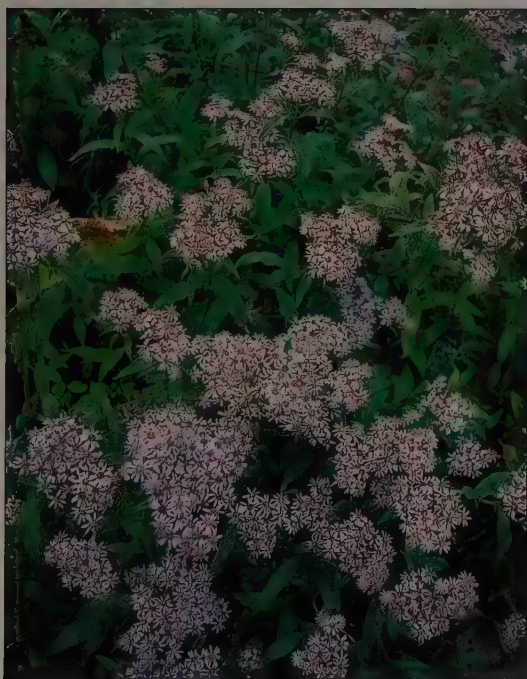
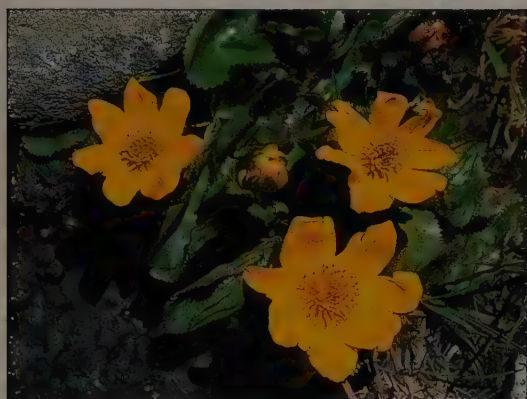


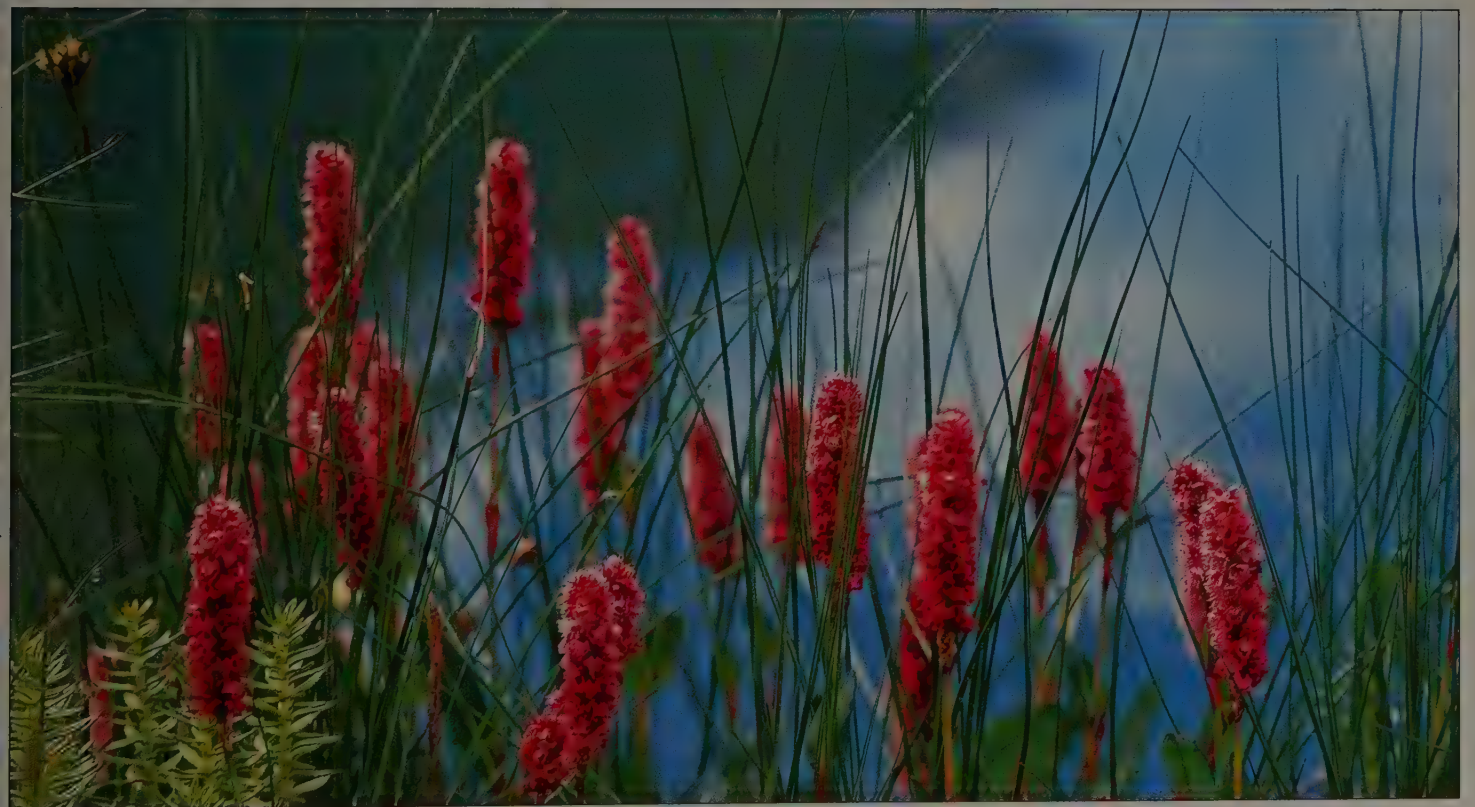


Early morning, pilgrims cross the bridge that spans Hem Ganga (the stream whose source is Hemkunt Lake) to begin their 3-5 hours of arduous climb to Sri Hemkunt Sahib, ascending about 5,000 feet over a 5 km track. Those who lack strength and stamina to undertake this ascent on foot engage mules, *kandis* or *dandis* to carry them.

All along the pathway there abound rich alpine flora. A variety of floral shrubs can be seen growing around. *Rhododendrons* are spotted in their umbrella-like clusters of many hues—scarlet, pink, magenta or mauve. *Horsechestnut* trees, some of which are over 30 metres high, also seem to line the path. Ornamental trees of Indian *laburnum* also present an attractive relief. Many varieties of the *primulus* family, some with round folia, decorate the slopes. However, at places, one notices bare rocks from underneath which a shrub may be struggling to emerge. Here and there are trees of *bhoj patra*.

Images on pages 74-79: Diversity of flowers, the ornaments of Nature













Often, wisps of mist engulf the snow-clad peaks. At times, the whole landscape gets intensely befogged. On some days it might even rain. However, the pilgrims brave the vagaries of climate chanting *Satnam Waheguru* or singing *shabads* from the holy book which they have memorised. Once in a while, they stop on the way at a teastall to have something to eat or simply rest their limbs. Younger pilgrims help the aged, providing them succour and support, pressing or massaging their fatigued limbs, or giving them nuts and candy to replenish their energy. All along the track, pilgrims keep chanting such *shabads* as

Charan chalo marag Gobind.

(Tread O my feet! The Lord's path.)

Pilgrims on a route cut through a glacier.



Reaching halfway, the forest ends and a field of *brahm kamal* appears. It spans an area of one square kilometer. These lovely flowers grow out of solid rock and astonish the onlooker with the graceful perspective that they present. One must neither touch nor smell these flowers but enjoy their exquisite visual beauty. Their roots dug into granite and their petals pointing to heaven seem to have a message for man.

Passing through scene after changing scene of such marvelously rich natural beauty, one feels impelled to exclaim:

Balihari kudrat vasia

Tera ant na jai lakhia.

(O Lord! Who pervades Nature, may I be a sacrifice unto You.

None can fathom Your bounds.)

After a while, one reaches a spot from where one can take either of the two routes to the final destination. One of these is a flight of 1184 steps leading straight to the gateway to Sri Hemkunt Sahib. The other is a continuation of the same mountainous path taken thus far that winds up by the mountainside. Since Sri Hemkunt Sahib is situated on a plateau at a lower level than the final flight of this pathway, time and again the expectant eyes of the pilgrims spot the *Nishan Sahib* with reverence, but time after time are dismayed by the still unending distance.



Pilgrims braving snow and slush



Eventually, whichever route the pilgrims take, they suddenly get tremendous relief and joy when they get the first full glimpse of Sri Hemkunt Sahib—the shrine, the *sarovar* (lake) and the *sapt shring* (seven mountain peaks) The beauty of the spectacle is beyond words. One is simply mesmerised. Body-fatigue suddenly departs. A divine joy overwhelms the soul. Self-surrender occurs spontaneously and a sublime humility comes to pervade the being. The beatitude experienced is simply undescrivable.

The majestic impress of the scene makes everyone spellbound. The effort put in and the hardships one went through to reach here suddenly look worthwhile. As the altitude now is 15,210 ft. above sea level, oxygen is sparse, and the air-pressure diminishes. Some pilgrims might become somewhat breathless but their souls are so captivated by *le beau ideal* of the grand spectacle that the little discomfort is easily overlooked.

Left: Devotees walking up a snow covered path

Below: Pilgrims at the shrine

Following double spread: Reflection of the snow-clad peaks in the sarovar

Double spread pages 86-87: Nature offering it bouquets











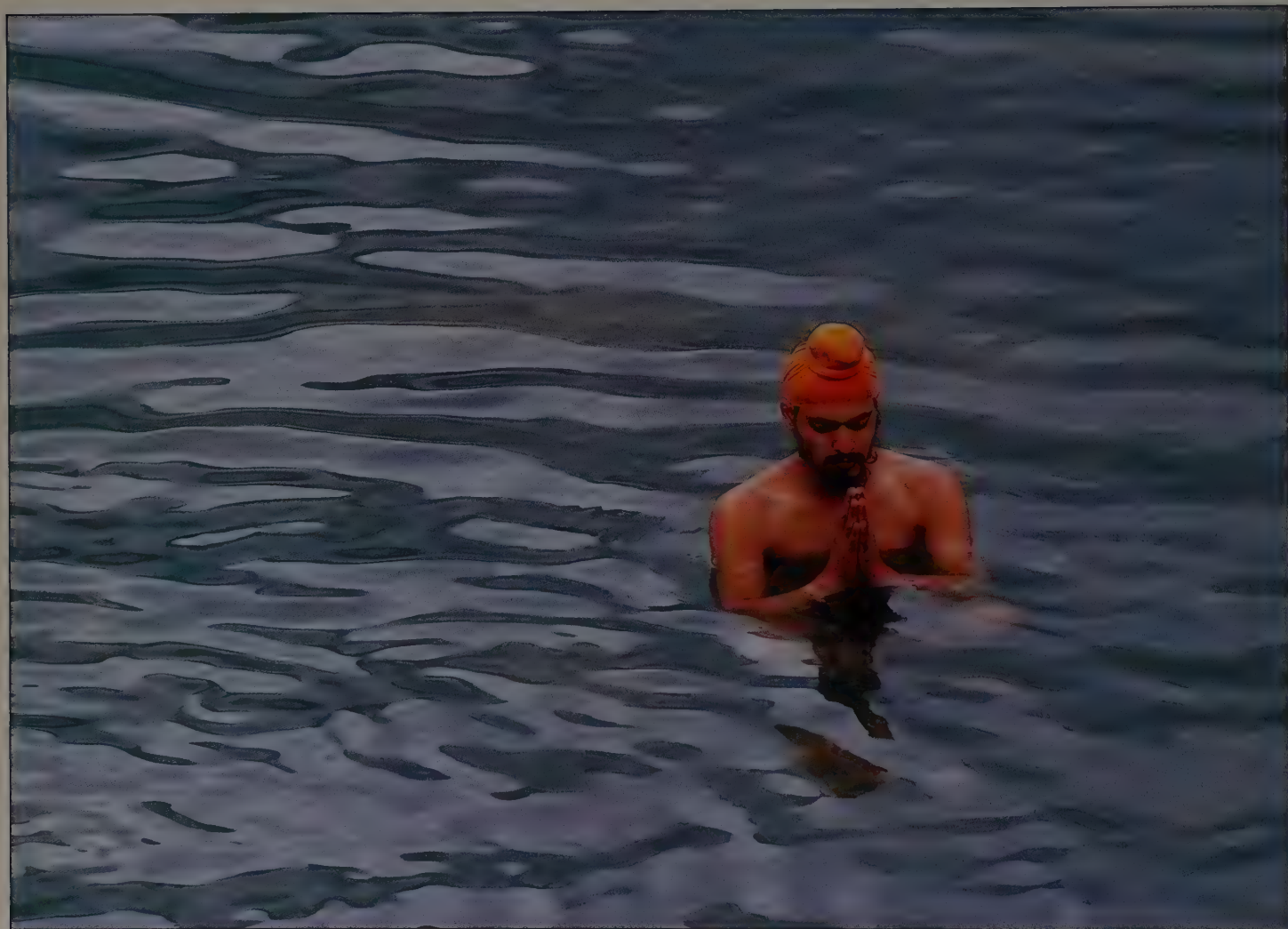
The snow-clad peaks look immaculate, the cool breeze appears venerable, the *sarovar* seems pious. Every rock, every stone, every particle flits grace. The whole atmosphere is nothing short of heavenly. The silence of the hills is charged with divinity. This edifying experience consecrates every soul. One is simply inundated in spirituality.

The expanse of the *sarovar* appears inviting. One feels the urge to have a dip. Taking a quick dip in the almost freezing cold water most pilgrims make haste to come out. Others are somewhat reticent and first immerse their hand in the water to test whether they would be able to withstand its cold. There are others, more devout and more determined, who decide to stay on in the *sarovar* long enough to complete a recitation of the *Japji Sahib* (the principal liturgical text).

Below: A young pilgrim engrossed in recitation of Japji Sahib in the sarovar

Facing page top: In keeping with the Sikh tradition, the Nishan Sahib flutters high

Facing page below: Pilgrims offering homage to Nishan Sahib





After having had *ishnan* (bath) in the *sarovar*, pilgrims reverently move towards the shrine. The first feature that impresses them even from a distance is the unique architecture of the shrine. Its roof is of the shape of an inverted lotus flower. *Urdh kamal* (inverted lotus) is an important image in *Gurbani* that represents the yet unblossomed soul of man. However, just as the inverted lotus flower straightens up and blossoms (*urdh kamal bigsana*) when the sun shines on it, so too the human soul blossoms when it is enlightened. Just as a lotus flower stands in a pool of water, the shrine stands by the Hemkunt lake.

Shrine by the side of the sarovar on a clear day
Photo © Manohar Singh



The architecture of Darbar Sahib at Amritsar is also based on the same image – that of the lotus flower. Yet, the *urdh kamal* there has a more natural shape than the geometrical one here at Sri Hemkunt Sahib. Such transformation was essential in order to make the structure withstand heavy snow and ice of the winter. Such a thoughtful design bears testimony to the wisdom of its designers—S. Manmohan Singh Siali, the architect, and General Harkirat Singh, the engineer. Another notable aspect of its design is its pentagonal base. The figure five (*panj*) has assumed a reverential archetypal significance in Sikh lore— as evidenced in *panj piare*, *panj kakar*, *panj baanian*, *panj takhat*. The above characteristics of design make this shrine an impressive piece of architecture.

Before entering the hall of the shrine, the pilgrims generally prefer to make a *parikarma* (circumambulation) around it. This is considered a reverential act. As one climbs up to the Darbar

Inside the sanctum sanctorum at Hemkunt Sahib



Below: Devotees preparing langar

Far below: Hemkunt Sahib attracts a large number of visitors from India and abroad.

Facing page: Langar being served outside Bhai Vir Singh Hall at Hemkunt Sahib



Hall, the atmosphere of piety that prevails there overwhelms the senses. Pilgrims come with folded hands, bow reverentially before *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* and peacefully sit down on the carpeted floor in a meditative mood. Receptiveness mounts for the holy music that is being sung. The pilgrims become all ears when the *granthi* recites the *hukamnama* from the holy book after *ardas*, or a functionary of the place narrates the story of Sri Hemkunt Sahib as described in *Bachitra Natak*. They become all appreciation for the pioneers who discovered this site and the devotees who constructed the shrine. They are all praise for such leaders of the Hemkunt Gurdwara Management Trust as Col. Joginder Singh Mann, S. Shamsheer Singh, and others who have done so much to make the pilgrimage comfortable for the pilgrims.





The Return Journey

Although the pilgrims become so enamoured with this holy place that they would like not to depart from it, yet they have to beg leave of it because the nights there are intolerably cold. Hence, pretty soon they have to begin their journey to get back to Gobind Dham before sunset. As they exit out of the shrine, they cast a final glance all around before departing. They may look at the seven peaks a little more intently. They may even notice *nishan sahibs* atop each peak. Some adventurous devotees must have been inspired to conquer these peaks to fix the *nishan sahibs* there. Each one of these flag posts, from the distance, appears to be of a size no bigger than a small candle. If, as it often happens, a mist gathers around the shrine, the shrine appears suspended—held by the mist in between the seven peaks.

The descent is no less arduous than the ascent. One has to be careful with each step. However, one is no longer so breathless. Having successfully concluded the trek to the holy shrine, one feels blessed. The pilgrims can now afford to cast a glance around. The flora that had gone unnoticed previously now attracts their attention and often evokes surprise about how such beauty escaped their attention while going up. By dusk, the pilgrims are all back in Gobind Dham and join the congregation for *Rahiras Sahib*, the evening service.

After a night's rest in Gobind Dham, they start early next morning trekking back to Gobind Ghat. They often cross some other group of pilgrims going up towards Gobind Dham and chanting

*Charan sharan Guru ek painda jae chal,
Satguru kot painda aage hoe let hai*

-Bhai Gurdas: Kabit Sawayeeeyee

(Just walk one step towards the Guru to
seek his refuge,

The Guru shall walk a million steps to receive you.)

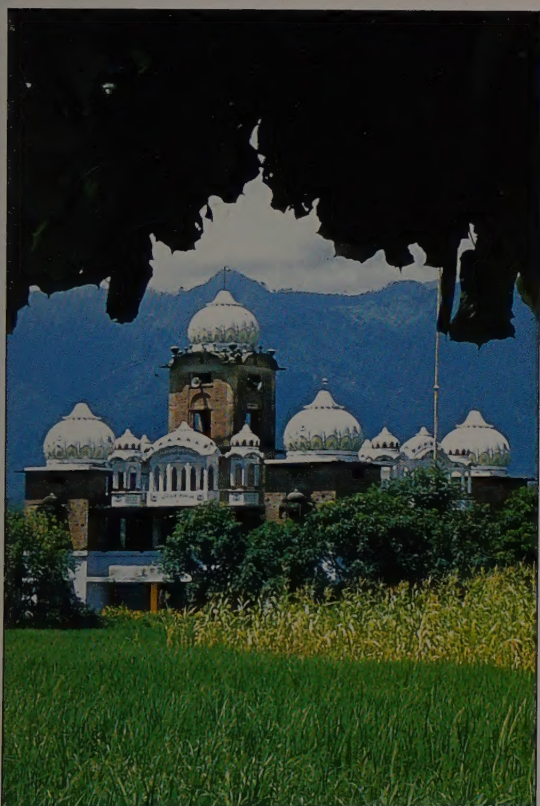
Then they greet one another with *Waheguru ji ka khalsa, Waheguru ji ki fateh*. The way back to Gobind Ghat is not so strenuous. The pilgrims halt far less often at teastalls compared

Below: Gurdwara Paonta Sahib

Facing page top: Gurdwara Tirgarhi Sahib

Facing page below: Gurdwara Bhangani Sahib





to their journey upwards. By the evening, they are at Gobind Dham and join the evening service in the gurdwara there.

Next morning, they board their buses to take them to Rishikesh. Briefly halting at Srinagar for food, they arrive at Rishikesh before the evening. Here, minds are prepared for partings. Promises are made for continual contact and visits. Addresses and keepsakes are exchanged. After the evening service in the gurdwara, the pilgrims express their appreciation for the nice arrangements they enjoyed all along.

Next morning, most pilgrims return to Delhi, but some choose to make a visit to Paonta Sahib located on the right bank of the river Yamuna in Himachal Pradesh. Guru Gobind Singh founded this town in 1685. The land was an offering made by Raja Medni Prakash of Nahan. The guru stayed in this town for nearly three years. This was the period of intense literary activity by the guru as well as his 52 court poets. *Kavi darbars* were held every evening on the bank of Yamuna and the guru showered his gifts in appreciation of the good literary works presented. A stroll along the bank of Yamuna makes one appreciate the sublimity of the surroundings in which such prolific creative work was produced.

It was during the guru's stay in Paonta Sahib, that the battle of Bhangani took place. It was at Bhangani that Guru Gobind Singh fought and won his first battle against the hill chiefs. Two shrines exist at Bhangani that commemorate this battle. One is Gurdwara Tirgarhi that stands over the mound from which the guru watched and controlled the battle. The other is Gurdwara Bhangani Sahib that marks the site where the guru set up arsenal for the battle. Sant Seva Singh got the present impressive gurdwara built in late 1970s.

Whatever return route the pilgrims take, memories of this pilgrimage to Sri Hemkunt Sahib go with them and they treasure them for ever.

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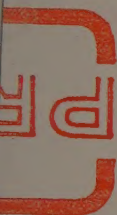
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Pilgrimage to Hemkunt

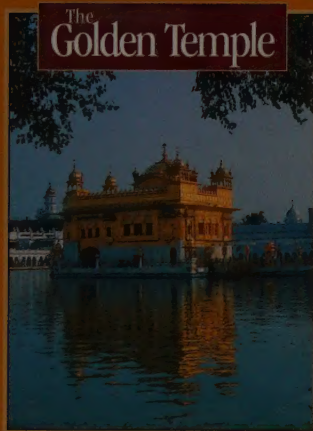
Situated at a height of over 15,000 feet above the sea level in the Himalayan ranges of northern India, Sri Hemkunt Sahib has emerged as a popular centre of Sikh pilgrimage which is visited by thousands of devotees from all over the world every summer. According to *Bachitra Natak*, the autobiographical account of the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh, it was at Hemkunt 'adorned with seven snow-clad peaks' that he meditated in his previous birth.

It was during the thirties of the twentieth century that the place was discovered by Sant Sohan Singh and Bhai Modan Singh. Bhai Vir Singh, Sikh savant and a leading figure of the Singh Sabha movement, played an important role first in helping these two gentlemen by verifying for them the location of the place and later by providing financial support for building a gurdwara at Hemkunt. Collective efforts of Sikh pioneers backed by the community support led to the construction of gurdwaras en route including Gobind Ghat (6,000 feet) and Gobind Dham (10,500 feet).

In spite of difficult terrain where Hemkunt is situated, devotees from all over the world make it to this unique Sikh shrine every summer. On the way they also visit other important gurdwaras in Rishikesh, Srinagar and Joshimath. On their way back they pay homage at Paonta Sahib, Bhangani Sahib, Tirgarhi Sahib and Shergah Sahib Gurdwaras. Apart from enjoying scenic beauty of the snow-clad peaks and taking a dip into the icy cold water of the lake, the devotees can see rare brahm kamal flowers. Some of them also visit the world famous Valley of Flowers not far from Sri Hemkunt Sahib.

Dr. Jaswant Singh Neki, a leading Sikh scholar, poet and former Director of PGI, Chandigarh, has contributed the text while Sondeep Shankar, India's leading photographer, has provided pictures covering the pilgrimage to Sri Hemkunt Sahib.

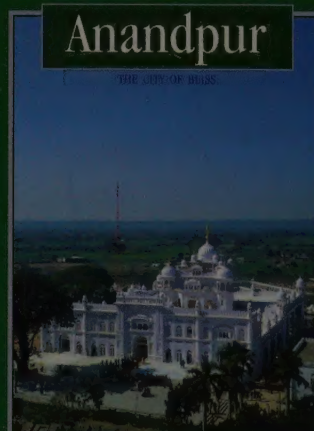
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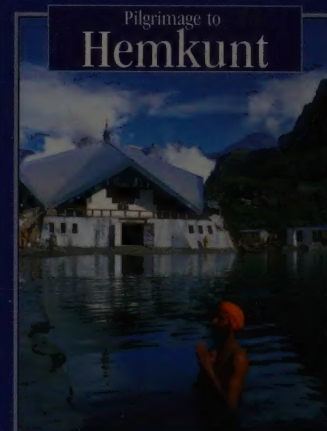
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